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ABSTRACT

Urban public libraries are confronted with a decreasing demand for traditional, book-oriented library services. In Detroit, library outreach programs attempted to encourage disadvantaged people to use the library with little success. The information that people needed in their everyday lives was not to be found in the library. To correct this situation, Detroit initiated The Information Place (TIP) program, an information and referral service that attempted to fill basic information needs. Collecting and organizing community information gave the library a new relation to its patrons and provided a new challenge to the library staff. (PF)

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Reflections on Library Service to the Disadvantaged

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3

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Reflections on Library Service to the Disadvantaged

Introduction

In response to membership concern, the Council of the American Library Association established in June, 1968, a coordinating committee on library service to the disadvantaged "to direct, coordinate and evaluate the various Association activities to insure maximum effectiveness . . ." of ALA units involved in library service to the disadvantaged.

The Committee decided in 1971 that this function could best be performed by establishing at ALA headquarters an office of Library Service to the Disadvantaged. It is the purpose of the office to be an information exchange for librarians in the field who are looking for ways to improve or expand or begin a people-oriented library program.

For a number of reasons, it is appropriate that this first publication of the Office is the talk given by Mrs. Jones at the June 1973 Annual Conference of the American Library Association, at the first program meeting sponsored by the advisory committee for the Office.

The message that Mrs. Jones brings is simple and direct: if librarians desire to be of more service, in a professional way, to people of their constituency, it would be a good idea for librarians to do something that needs doing, and that people can see needs doing. Mrs. Jones points out the simple and inescapable fact that everyone, regardless of station in life, needs information to survive; further that people who by our rather peculiar social system of labelling have been labelled "disadvantaged," need more information than most people, and more particularly need a special kind of help in getting information.

Gently stripping away the mystique and obfuscation that has come to surround the practice and philosophy of librarianship, Mrs. Jones suggests that getting information together, putting it into usable form, and helping people use it, is not only a proper job for librarians, but perhaps the best way for us to make ourselves socially useful at this time.

I don't know whether Mrs. Jones is the first to move from branch librarian to head of a major urban library system but it is clear that she has not forgotten what she learned from her eighteen years' experience in the neighborhoods, among the people.

She sets a sound conceptual base for a library service program that is directed towards "life-serving needs." She questions the wisdom of "programming" as an end in itself, and wonders also whether reading guidance is any longer a valid use of the librarian's time and skill. The paper concludes with a practical and convincing report on information and referral in the Detroit Public Library.

As one who has considered, over the past decade, this matter of getting through the underbrush to a simple, straightforward, people-oriented library, I have often wondered what it takes to convince librarians that this is the way to go.

It seemed to me when I heard it last June, and it seems to me reading it again now, that this calm, clear, strong, well-reasoned statement by Clara Jones ought to set up some motion. The Office presents it with that idea in mind.

The Office for Library Service to the Disadvantaged is for members to use. Jean Coleman began as the first full-time director of the Office September 1973. Requests for information, and reports of successful work that librarians have carried out in meeting "life-serving needs" may be directed to her at ALA Headquarters.

Meredith Bloss
Chairman, ALA Advisory
Committee
Library Services to the
Disadvantaged
1973–1974

Reflections on Service to the Disadvantaged

Who would ever have expected, a few years back, that such safely established institutions as public schools and public libraries would suffer the uprooting challenges that have come in recent years? We have grown accustomed to the intense criticism levelled from every quarter at public schools, and we observe the changes taking place in their philosophy and organization. Although the public library still enjoys a kind of veneration and affection in the public regard, sentimentality and nostalgia carry little weight in hard decision making, especially in times of unusual economic stress. In a full-scale economic depression, everyone is in financial difficulty, but during the greater part of the past decade, a tortuous uncertainty has been reserved for the public library, the large urban systems in particular. Every claim to public coffers is questioned in terms of the marketplace: what do you offer that is useful, that the public cannot forego? What tangible contribution does your function make? The public library's traditional validity is no longer taken for granted.

"the [library] crisis must be recognized as far more than financial."

Widespread, serious financial ills have surfaced only in very recent years, but the present crisis has been a long time in the making, and it must be recognized as far more than financial. The profession became uneasy some years back, but could not foresee the radical effects of the

tremendous social convolutions on the kind of role public libraries would be required to play. By now, however, every public library in the nation is examining its philosophy and function; all are searching for identity and direction in the context of today's turmoil. Our earliest response to the changing city was to begin making book selection and staffing reflect more sensitively the needs of the new public, and then we turned with vigor to make programming more relevant. Under the banner of "outreach," librarians of the nation mounted a giant-size, intensely sincere effort to gather in the heretofore "unreached." Two decades later, the profession has come close to mastering the techniques of "relevant" programming (these overworked code words!), but we should examine the library's actual outreach into the community.

". . . the unreached . . . continue to be the vast majority . . . 75 to 85% . . ."

Who are the unreached? The *Public Library Inquiry*, published in 1950, revealed that public libraries were serving only 15 to 25% of the total population, and concluded that this small group constituted the "leaders." (Librarians of the day seemed to accept this statement as a definition of public library potential.) Those figures cannot be considered infallible, but they indicate unmistakably who the unreached were, and continue to be—the vast majority of people, probably 75 to 85% of the total population. This suggests the importance of the library outreach program.

In public library parlance of recent years, "outreach" has been associated with "the disadvantaged," or with "the inner city," etc. In the back of our minds there has been a simplistic belief that if only the burgeoning "minorities" could somehow be enticed to read, public library service would be restored to the normalcy of yesteryear. Following this line of thought, attractive programming seemed to be the appropriate device to lure new patrons. This line of action means, first, that we have been limiting the scope and thrust of outreach almost exclusively to the disadvantaged, while in reality, the legions of unserved, the 75 to 85% of the overall population, remain now, as in the "good ole days," outside the range of library service. Second, we have concentrated almost exclusively on attractive, relevant programming to stimulate interest and achieve our large goal of expanding library usage. In thus restricting our range, we are assuming that programming is the only "outreach skill," and that our only necessary target is the "disadvantaged." We must explore other dimensions and approaches, and, moreover, study the implications of our limited 15 to 25% direct reach into the populace. Our thinking and

planning to broaden the effectiveness of the public library must be as inclusive as we discover the problem itself to be. No single approach will bring a final solution, and unless we deal with the totality, we will never find the right direction or make the right discoveries.

". . . improved programs and relevant book selection are only first steps . . ."

The current era of imaginative, public library programming has benefited library service immeasurably. Librarians' skills and inventiveness know no bounds, and there is free sharing of the plentiful supply of successful program ideas. Book selection policy has been modified by the philosophy of relevancy and outreach, and is on the way to becoming more attuned to changing interests and needs. However, we must recognize that improved programming and book selection are only beginning steps, albeit important ones. The profession's mastery of many effective methods in this area has given our spirits a lift, but there has been no appreciable difference in the library's outreach into the community, in spite of our singleminded, optimistic persistence.

We know that public libraries began to proliferate during the latter half of the 19th century, paralleling the influx of European immigrants to American urban centers during the heightening industrial revolution. Throughout this period libraries functioned as adjuncts to the public schools, as adult education and general cultural centers, helping the process of Americanization, and also as general neighborhood information centers. The latter role was a very practical one, serving the everyday, human-size problems of coping with life in cities that were rapidly growing and changing. Librarians did not call this latter service by any special name, nor was it codified or developed into a system. This informal service can be regarded as the origin of what we now call information and referral service.

Public libraries, always sensitive social barometers, responded to people's practical needs during times of crisis, such as World War I, the Depression of the '30's, World War II, etc. The value and effectiveness of the public library was heightened during the Depression, when substantial numbers of unemployed adults filled libraries to capacity. I personally recall the vital "War Information Center" at Detroit Public Library during World War II.

There was a gradual change in scope of service in branch libraries as Americans became second- and third-generation citizens. Reference work and reading guidance for self-development and recreation ("creative

reading") continued, but the neighborhood branch became less a central point for non-book problem questions. The library was still a vital force, however; the 15 to 25% made the libraries humming centers of activity, until onrushing changes altered the character of urban centers. The outlook and function of central or main libraries have not changed as much as branch library systems, but the portent for the future indicates more active involvement in community life. Large, urban main libraries have always been places for scholarly pursuit; their responsiveness to community activities has varied greatly according to individual departments. Information and referral service continues to be commonplace in the typical central library departments, as in business and finance, technology and science, and the performing arts.

". . . the life-needs type of service . . . was not recognized . . . as regular library service."

The gradual withdrawal from the life-needs type of service must have evolved in response to changing times, but also because its value and appropriateness for libraries were not recognized, and because it was not standardized as regular library service. Certainly everyday informational needs have not lessened; life has grown more complex and impersonal than ever. There is increasing need for guidance through the maze of social, legal, governmental and other agencies, regardless of socio-economic class. Social agencies have tried to develop information and referral for their clientele, but the necessary reference skills in organizing information are not part of their discipline, limiting their ability to answer this need. Also, their institutions are independent, highly diversified operations that are not called upon to function as a unit, as public libraries do.

We are aware of the impact of the new profession of "information scientists" or "information specialists," which has sprung up in recent years. They have had to learn and exploit the skills of the library profession, but for the most part they have rejected official connection with librarianship. Some admit that their impression of librarians was negative; they judged us to be a benign profession, impractical and incapable of encompassing their broad, new concept that is, frankly, commercial, venturesome and profitable. They have used computers from the beginning, plus an ever widening variety of technological devices. I observed in West Germany in the fall of 1972 while on a library study tour, that the elaborate "documentation centers" (large, beautiful buildings) are not allied to the library profession at all. On the contrary, in every case the German "documentalists" (counterparts of our "information scientists") pointedly

explained that they are not librarians. (My cynical guess is that designation as librarians might have caused them to suffer a loss in status and pay.) Nevertheless, the more they described their work, the clearer it became that they *are* librarians who have moved out into a highly favored, sophisticated new area, doing in-depth, specialized kinds of bibliography and research, but able to do it supremely well because the professional library science skills they have developed supplement their subject backgrounds.

". . . information centers . . . are a rejuvenation of old-fashioned people-oriented library service . . ."

Information and referral service in public libraries is not an aberration in the same sense as the new profession of "information science," which has separated itself from the mother profession. Public library community information centers remain within the fold of traditional library science. They can become as sophisticated as need be, also employing technological devices, but on any level, they are essentially a rejuvenation of an old-fashioned, people-oriented public library service, now formalized with modern techniques and adapted to today's needs.

Book circulation count is not to be worshipped as the only measure of effectiveness; but with few exceptions, public library readership in the largest cities continues to decline. In these times of questioning and challenging, public libraries can no longer depend on their reputation of past usefulness to insure special immunity from searching examination and criticism. In this period of tight budgets, public libraries are in keen competition with all city departments, including the garbage department. The hard questions are being asked: What percentage of the people do you serve, and what are your per capita circulation costs? Are you duplicating service given by other institutions? What services do you offer that are needed and demanded by a substantial portion of residents, etc.? These are just beginning questions and there will be more to follow. Public libraries are being challenged to prove their worth and justify their operations. It will take perceptiveness and stamina to come through this ordeal. If we are to succeed, we must first define the areas of our strengths and vulnerability and confront them.

As a branch librarian for 18 years, I was an active proponent of "outreach" into the community and the library administration gave me free rein. At one branch library in particular we brought groups of every description into the building for meetings and programs, and the staff did their best to inspire interest in reading and library use. We made the

library well known in the community by speaking at churches, labor unions, block clubs, parent-teacher organization—wherever people gathered, and on radio and television as well. This created tremendous neighborhood good will for the library and had a very slight favorable effect on statistics in that one area of the city, but no trend was stopped or started. Incidentally, it is my impression that one of the most meaningful results came from our talking with groups of parents about the importance of reading in the educational and personal development of their children. In making the long trek from the deep south or other faraway places to industrial centers, parents were seeking, first, improved economic conditions, and next, better educational opportunities for their children. Libraries were not thought of nor their value appreciated because they had not been part of the family's previous experience. There was always a noticeable response whenever this message about the importance of reading was explained with parents bringing their children into the library for that first visit.

I never wavered in the conviction that "outreach" activity is valid and greatly needed, but it was discouraging to work so hard for such slight reward. Somehow, the library's offering was not compelling or competitive enough (excellent book talks were delivered by many librarians), and there was no irresistible product, no service that touched lives at the "gut-level."

". . . information and referral is not a gimmick, but . . . a natural evolution."

To my way of thinking it has become obvious that public libraries can no longer depend on reading guidance as the only major adult activity. We must move into a dimension that has lain fallow too long, namely, information and referral. How I wish I could have had something like this to offer years ago as I moved about the community—something to offer people that would answer a life-size need. Information and referral is not an artificially manufactured gimmick, but part of a natural evolution. The wide-awake young men and women who turned themselves into "information scientists" sensed a distinctive new need (different from information and referral) and capitalized on it. We who are traditional librarians looked back longingly on our old, comfortable ways, made a few modifications to placate changing times, and seemed to hope for a miracle of salvation. It is impossible to remain alive without responding to the force of a worldwide social revolution that already has the momentum of two decades behind it!

"For better, for worse; for richer, for poorer . . ." we have made a commitment at the Detroit Public Library to information and referral service. We made this determination three years ago. The federal grant for the five cities consortium (Detroit, Cleveland, Queens, Atlanta and Houston) has advanced our efforts greatly, and the regular contact between the five cities has been beneficial to all.

We have named our service "TIP," an acronym for "THE INFORMATION PLACE." In the beginning, various librarians gave as much time as they could spare, here and there, to start our central file. Information, materials and assistance from the Sociology and Economics Department enabled us to form the basic file. It took more than a year and a half to compile a respectable beginning file, but with the coming of federal funds we were able to have two full-time librarians and a clerk on the project. We opened service in November 1972 in one branch library, and in January 1973 in a second. It soon became abundantly clear that it would take much too long to follow this slow schedule for 29 community branch libraries. Interest, eagerness, suspicion and many questions had been building up over the months of preparation, and TIP was the controversial topic of discussion. In the meantime, every branch received a copy of the central file in a four-drawer cabinet. The TIP staff (including two part-time social worker-consultants by this time, one of whom was from the faculty of Wayne State University Graduate School of Social Work) planned a series of workshops for Branch Librarians for instruction and orientation. This was preparatory to launching TIP service simultaneously in all branches. The workshops seemed well received, but implementation is not instant. Each branch must add its own community information to its copy of the central file. This requires "community walks" to gather information from businesses, block clubs, churches, institutions, key individuals, etc. With each contact, librarians publicize all services of the library and groups are invited into the branch library auditoriums for meetings.

"Information . . . is becoming part of the way of life in every branch of the DPL."

In between the lines of all I have been saying are the usual small and large human problems of introducing something new. There has been skepticism and justifiable criticism, along with interest and enthusiasm, and a full quota of knotty problems and mistakes. Impatience and mounting suspense during the period of preparation, before and after the first two branches were initiated, very naturally created expectation of some-

13

thing fearsome, and the reality at long last could hardly escape being anticlimactic. TIP cannot produce an immediate about-face for the library, and it requires a great deal of advance and continuing spade work. In the short span of time since its inception (early 1971) unevenness in progress is evident from branch to branch because many unpredictable elements are involved. As with the total operation of a branch library, the attitude of the branch Chief is extremely important to success. It is extremely important to emphasize that TIP must be a fully incorporated service, not a separate project. TIP is becoming part of the way of life in any branch of the Detroit Public Library. Its introduction has provided an exciting growth experience for the whole staff.

An unusual stroke of luck for TIP was the donation of a publicity campaign from a prominent local advertising firm for the month of June, 1973. Several full size billboards around the city were donated to advertise TIP service in bold red letters on a white background. Placards were placed in public buses, handbills distributed all over town; there were spot announcements on radio, film clips on TV channels, and there has been excellent newspaper coverage. All of this was occasioned by a public service gift from one advertising firm. As a result, all branch libraries are receiving calls with the "TIP Central" desk and telephone at the Main Library becoming extremely busy (well over 6,000 telephone calls per month).

We have been most fortunate in our public relations. Cooperation has been established with the Community Information Center at United Community Services headquarters. The large Wayne County social services department will be another key contact in reaching great numbers of people with the message that practical help is available from TIP. This agency is in a position to refer great numbers of people directly to the library on a continuing basis. Response has been favorable from several other institutions in the city that need information service. The Detroit News, our largest daily newspaper, now uses a recording to refer their "questions and answers" traffic to DPL–TIP.

Several months ago, my Deputy Director (Bob Croneberger), who is Project Director for TIP (as part of his responsibility as head of branch libraries), was invited to speak about TIP at a meeting of suburban library directors. They were familiar with the concept, of course, and responded favorably to it and to the manner in which we are developing our project. We were very much interested in their observations regarding suburban library usage. Serious apprehension has not surfaced yet, they say, but they have detected signs in their libraries of the familiar urban pattern of diminishing readership. There is an expected falling away from reading as children grow into their teens, but this loss is increasing and

there is a decrease in the number of young people joining the ranks of adult regulars. The directors view this as possibly the beginning of a trend and recognize the need for expansion into information and referral service. They have been quick to see that their libraries must redefine their role if the institution is to remain viable. They even expressed an interest in joining in some kind of information and referral network with the Detroit Public Library, and suggested an eventual statewide expansion.

". . . focus on reading guidance is too narrow . . . to insure the future of the public library . . ."

The exodus of the '50s and '60s to the suburbs carried a large portion of the core city's confirmed library goers. However, the testimony of the suburban librarians reveals the universality of the pressures of a society in turmoil and change. This demonstrates the importance of a serious attention to library outreach. The focus on reading guidance alone is too narrow, too exclusive to insure the future of the public library at this juncture in history. Happily, we are not faced with the necessity of choosing between traditional library service and information and referral service. Reading guidance is basic and could never be eliminated or reduced without destroying the public library. However, exploitation of information and referral service will call for an adjustment of priorities and penetrating examination of traditional methods.

I would like to quote from a paper I asked Bob Croneberger to write for the staff that sets forth the basic principles of information and referral as we see it for the Detroit Public Library.

"Library strength lies in locating, indexing, arranging and disseminating information. Most of this information has traditionally been in book form, but the Detroit Public Library has at various times undertaken 'community information center' type activities. Its 'War Information Center,' for example, during World War II, served the practical needs of citizens whose lives were drastically affected by the wartime economy and the war itself. There has been a recent change in the type of demand made on our information stores. The information needs of today's city residents are oriented to a large degree, toward basic human services and have not been identified and indexed in depth; nor have they been compiled in one central agency. Information and materials about services, public and non-public are fragmented, widely scattered, and in some cases almost unobtainable. New services develop continually. The Detroit Public Library must use its expertise, its skills, and its trained staff to be an information searching organization, dependent not only upon its own accumulated

15

print resources, but upon its ability to search outside its walls for "non-book" information as well, to provide a single information tool available to the public. The library should be the first point of reference for any inquiry from city residents as a means of securing direction through the maze of agencies and organizations. It will not replace existing resources, but rather will develop the climate, the psychological trust and mutual respect within which collaboration, for the benefit of the individual citizen, can take place. It has overcome the limitations of a multitude of directories through application of professional indexing and cataloging skills. It will release professional personnel in other fields who are now engaged in what is essentially 'library work,' to operate their existing community agencies, and leave routines which require library skills in the hands of the library."

". . . we are the only ones who can do it right."

The need for information knows no social or economic lines, and applies to individuals and organizations alike. No one else in society is trained as librarians are to locate and make available information of all kinds. Librarians have classified and cataloged all printed knowledge of all times and places and have made it easily available, keeping it current, answering special needs with bibliographies and indexes. Several decades ago libraries reached beyond the printed word to embrace audio-visual materials, pushing back the traditional perimeters. Information and referral service makes a similar bid for inclusion, demanding that librarians systematize all information that is pertinent to our lives. It's a tall order; it is the profession's new/old arm of outreach, and it speaks to a bed-rock need. It is directed to librarians because we are the only ones who can do it right.

CLARA S. JONES
Director
Detroit Public Library
January, 1974

Appendix: Barometric Pressure on Public Libraries

"Public libraries, always sensitive social barometers, responded to people's pressing needs during times of crisis. . . ." This is a statement by Clara Jones, Director of the Detroit Public Library, and one filled to the brim with implications. Ms. Jones goes on to explain that these "times of crisis" were the two World Wars and the Depression Era but one might just as likely label the current national situation as crisis. And surely public libraries must, and are, responding, but if these libraries are to continue on a day-to-day basis to remain "a very real part of the fabric of [people's] lives," as Ms. Jones goes on, they cannot rely on prominent, public, yet sporadic crises to prove their worth.

They don't even have to. Today's national crises, the urban situation, the demands of society, etc. all produce enough very real, personal, mundane problems (crises) in the lives of individuals to keep social barometers responding nonstop. It is on this level, that of the individual coping with the daily complexities of living, that public libraries can and should respond most effectively. As social barometers public libraries can and should reflect the informational needs of their public and respond to those needs.

In the early months of the five-city NIC Project (A Proposal to Research and Design Criteria for the Implementation and Establishment of a Neighborhood Information Center in Five Public Libraries in Five Cities: Atlanta, Cleveland, Detroit, Houston, and Queens Borough) one of the participating libraries mailed questionnaires to residents of a particular neighborhood dealing with "identifying their informational needs."

It wasn't surprising they had little response, that's one of the problems of daily living—knowing what it is you need to know. But it's also one of the problems public libraries can help solve.

Learning from their experience we decided we could identify informational needs by the questions we were asked, that these questions were, in fact, statements of informational needs. So Detroit Public Library set out on its TIP Community Walks. We walked from our branch libraries to the neighborhood grocery, barber shop, police stations, variety store, pharmacy, gas station, and wherever else we could find. We told people, our own public, that the library can help them, that that library on the corner two blocks away can answer questions, not just questions about books, school, and homework, but questions about their lives, their problems, and their own community.

The response was, in every sense, overwhelming. On the spot, people asked for a notary public, a part-time employee, someone to call about a cracked and broken sidewalk, and where and how to apply for Social Security benefits. They asked, our public, if the library would lend space for a block club meeting, if the library would like to join the neighborhood business association, if the library would attend the next police-community relations meeting. They presented us, in very clear and concise terms, with their informational needs and then they asked us to respond to those needs.

Because Detroit Public Library already had a commitment to provide comprehensive community information and referral service, the TIP Service, we could make those claims and respond to those needs and we continue to do so. By every question TIP is asked and every answer and direction the TIP Service supplies the library continues truly to act as a sensitive social barometer. As a library and as librarians we are in a unique position to assimilate, record, organize, and index society's informational needs and provide responses to those needs.

Every time I finish explaining that as a librarian I not only don't sit around all day reading books but in fact spend a good deal of time talking to people, finding out about their problems and questions, and then looking for ways to answer these questions, the response is usually something like "that's great, I didn't know libraries did that." And, of course, not all libraries do do it, but they can. My own experience convinces me that providing information and referral service involves perhaps some of the most professional aspects of librarianship.

From the beginning it involves planning and a close look at institutional and professional goals, it involves research and reference techniques in understanding information needs and seeking appropriate resources and answers, it involves original cataloging and indexing, it involves

professional relations with other professions and with the public, and it demands a thorough understanding and knowledge of the community we serve.

But the key words are *information* and *service*. As libraries, depositories of information in every possible format, we cannot afford to exclude community information, that information about what is happening around us, information vital to us and others as functioning members of the community. As public librarians we cannot afford to exclude any part of our public, because they do not read or attend programs by not providing a real and usable service that is relevant to today.

Information and referral as a structural component of library service can put us directly in touch with both our public and the information they want and need. It can and does put us in touch, very literally, with *what's happening*. Information and referral service allows public libraries to function on a local level as important community service centers, reflecting and documenting daily the interests, needs, problems, situations, and circumstances of our community, and it is precisely this knowledge that allows public libraries to respond to the falling barometric pressure of our own society.

Michele Ann Kapecky

Michele Kapecky is currently the librarian in charge of the TIP Clearinghouse of the Detroit Public Library. She has worked with the TIP program from its very beginnings and was actively involved in its planning and organizational stages.